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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000472

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: FEW SHIA ALTERNATIVES TO HIZBALLAH
BEFORE ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 351

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Arabic Islamic Council (AIC) emerged in 2006 as a self-declared Arab alternative to Hizballah. AIC attracted the attention of Lebanese and Arab media because of its claims of "promoting a culture of peace and Arab unity" as opposed to Hizballah's culture of "armed resistance" and ties with Iran. Hizballah has not commented on AIC's policies. The AIC has declared that it has an armed wing, the Arabic Islamic Resistance (AIR), whose purpose is to "oppose the enemies of Arabism." There is no evidence to indicate such an armed wing actually exists. After declaring in November 2008 its intention to contest the June parliamentary elections, AIC announced in March 2009 that it would "boycott" the elections. Several other non-Hizballah Shia figures including former Speaker Hussein al Hussein and former Ambassador Khalil al Khalil, have also opted not to run in the elections, with the main exception being Lebanese Options Gathering leader Ahmad al-Assad. End Summary.

AIC: Background

2. (C) Sayyid Mohammed Ali El-Husseini, a thirty-year old graduate of the Iranian religious center in Qom, launched the Arabic Islamic Council (AIC) in 2006. AIC received funding from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and reached out to underserved Shia communities in south Lebanon and the Bekaa. In a November meeting with Public Diplomacy staff, the AIC announced that it would open television and radio stations, adding to its already existing newsletter, website, and online forum. The TV and radio outlets never opened. Hussein declared in November that AIC planned to participate in the June 7 parliamentary elections by running fourteen candidates, including women and youth, in several Shia districts. However, in March 2009, AIC announced its decision to "boycott" the elections because Hussein does not want to participate in a "non-transparent" process.

3. (C) AIC announced in a press release the establishment of the Arabic Islamic Resistance (AIR), an armed wing of AIC. Previously, Hussein had promoted peace as a means to counter aggression. In an interview with news portal [lebanonfiles.com](#), Hussein stated that AIR was militarily ready and that it had been training for seven months with

Hizballah's knowledge. Claiming to have 1500 armed men from different Arab countries, Hussein said AIR had conducted military maneuvers in the Bekaa. The maneuvers supposedly included the use of conventional and unconventional defensive tactics, establishing central command areas to coordinate future military operations, and tactics to counter potential chemical attacks. On April 12, AIR claimed it conducted a military maneuver for its newly created female military squad. However, there is no evidence that AIR has any armed wing, controls 1500 armed men or has a female military squad.

Love or Hate Relationship?

14. (C) The relationship between AIC and Hizballah is unclear. AIC headquarters are located on the Beirut airport highway, a Hizballah-dominated area. Contacts in the Beirut southern suburbs observed that Hizballah has neither harassed nor interfered with AIC.

15. (C) AIC has made public statements distancing itself from Hizballah. In an October, 2007 interview with alarabiya.net, Hussein accused the Iranian regime of attempting to "assassinate Arab Shia imams and political leaders...", he went on to say that "(We) as a group of Arab Shia imams...have started to mobilize against the guardianship of the jurisprudent and Iranian clout... our relationship with Hizballah is bad... I am the alternative to Hizballah and its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah." In November 2008, the National News Agency quoted Hussein during a press

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conference in Tyre. He stated "...there is no third Shia power in Lebanon, there is Hizballah and Amal, and the true popular base we represent is that of resistance and we originate from (this base)...we appreciate and value our good relationship with Amal and Hizballah, they welcome what we are doing, we work for Lebanon's sake." In his interview with lebanonfiles.com, Hussein claimed that AIC coordinates "not only with our brothers in Hizballah(but also with the Christian Resistance (nfi)...we will be side by side with the Lebanese Armed Forces."

AIC'S ROLE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO HIZBALLAH

16. (C) Media reports and AIC's website initially identified it as an alternative to Hizballah and said that it was focused solely on providing educational and welfare services.

During the November 2008 meeting, the AIC stressed that it was only concerned with services to the community; and its members reinforced its message of treating women equally. A Beirut Shia contact called AIC "nothing but an Iranian tool that adopts Hizballah's rhetoric and objectives but is based on Arabism."

17. (C) This same source told us that Hussein received \$500,000 from another, unidentified country to create an image of an armed group. Another contact from the Beirut southern suburbs recently told us that AIC was offered money to claim responsibility for the Katyusha rockets that were found in south Lebanon in February, but refused.

18. (C) Hussein justified AIC's aboutface on the election by accusing others of buying votes and because there have been, according to him, compromises between March 8 and March 14. Shia contacts in Beirut and the Bekaa said, however, that AIC decided to boycott the elections because its leadership was aware that it does not have enough popular support among the Shia to win any seats in the upcoming elections.

WHERE ARE THE OTHER SHIA ALTERNATIVES?

¶9. (C) Other non-Hizballah Shia also have changed their minds about running. Former Speaker Hussein al-Husseini withdrew his candidacy from Baalbeck-Hermel on April 22 and retired Lebanese Ambassador and figurehead of a prominent Shia family Khalil al-Khalil, who personally informed Embassy staff of his intention to run in Tyre (reftel), did not register to run. The primary Shia figure who is seemingly not bowing out to Hizballah is Lebanese Option Gathering (LOG) leader Ahmad al-Assad, who announced his own candidacy in Hasbaya-Marjeyoun on April 5. Observers criticize Assad because his Lebanon Options Group does not have a presence in the south.

¶10. (C) Assad announced five other individuals in districts in southern Lebanon are running as LOG candidates. One of the five, Elias Abu Rizk, who is Greek Orthodox and also running in Hasbaya-Marjeyoun, clarified to the media immediately after Assad's announcement that he was not running on LOG's list and subsequently refused to discuss the matter over the telephone with EmbOff. Another LOG candidate, Zein Khalifa, has since withdrawn his candidacy in Zahranj.

¶11. (C) A potentially third LOG Shia candidate, Mohammed Ali Mkalled, is publicly stating he is running independently in Nabatieh, but an Embassy contact told us he is "secretly allied with Assad." (Comment: While the withdrawal of candidates is to be expected, we notice a trend of candidates intentionally distancing themselves from the most vocally anti-Hizballah figure, Assad. The quieter Hizballah opponents have either dropped out, or are forging behind-the-scenes alliances to bolster their chances on election day. End comment.)
SISON